

Eric Jansson, the Pathway for Swedes to America

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For centuries people from the many nations of the world came to America in hopes of finding freedom, opportunity, and wealth. Although the first immigrants did not always achieve their goals, they were able to create a path for their fellow countrymen.

Eric Jansson, one such immigrant, came from Sweden to America seeking religious reform, eventually settling in northern Illinois near Victoria, Knox County. Jansson, born in Landsberga, Sweden in 1808, was the son of Jan Mattson and Sarah Erikdotter who were farmers. As a young man, he suffered from severe rheumatism and in 1830 had an acute attack causing him to fall. He experienced a religious vision revealing to him a new way of thinking. This led him away from traditional Christianity. He believed this message gave him the power to grant Christ's perfect grace to others. Once he bestowed this grace, they were not just sinless, but were no longer able to sin.

Jansson gathered a small group of hardworking uneducated farmers, and within ten years, had attracted hundreds of followers. His religion became popular, because many Swedes were distraught by the power of the state and the Lutheran church, the official religion of Sweden. Jansson's followers were also banned from practicing any other religions, even in the privacy in their own homes. Most of Jansson's followers were awed by his teachings, eager to follow the charismatic messiah, Jansson.

When Janssonists put their beliefs into action, they received unfavorable attention from the Lutheran church. In spite of this, they continued with church services, even though some were threatened by state officials. In 1844, Jansson, opposed to the church

and worldly learning, instructed his followers to hold book burnings. As a result, he was arrested by state officials, and he and his followers were accused of heresy.

Between 1844 and 1845 the Janssonists seemed to be in constant turmoil with the law and the Lutheran church. Not able to practice their religion freely, Jansson and his followers thought it best to leave their homeland and immigrated to America. Before taking such a drastic step, Jansson chose Olof Olsson, a preacher and close friend, to pursue the mission.

On December 18, 1845, Olsson landed in America in search of land for the Janssonists to build a colony. While in New York, he met a Sweden immigrant, Olof Gustaf Hedstorm, who told Olsson about land in Victoria, Knox County Illinois, where Hedstorm's brother had settled. Olsson traveled to Illinois to meet with him. In 1846 Olsson wrote Jansson telling him he purchased eighty acres and called it "Bishop Hill" after Jansson's birthplace, Biskopskulla.

Since Jansson had been jailed for committing a felony, the Swedish police forbade him to leave Sweden, especially with large numbers of followers. Consequently, the Janssonists petitioned the King, who allowed them to leave Sweden. However, the law was still looking for Jansson. He knew he needed to find a way to cross the border without being noticed. In the summer of 1846, believe it or not, Jansson, dressed up as a woman, boarded a ship with his followers and left for America.

After arriving in America, Jansson led the first 150 people to Bishop Hill. These immigrants suffered through a harsh winter and more than a quarter died. Even though the winter was deadly, still others immigrants followed. They divided up jobs according to ability. Some took up farming, shoe making, and local railroad work. They helped one

another build homes, and they shared their possessions willingly. By the end of 1847, there were 1000 people living in Bishop Hill.

Although the colony was doing well for a time, there were two factors that eventually led to its weakening – money and disease. No matter how much the immigrants conserved, they never had enough money. Eventually, cholera struck the colony, killing hundreds and leaving the colony in ruins.

In 1849, Jansson's cousin, Lotta Jansson, was granted the right to marry John Root, an educated and civilized member of the community. Even though the cholera epidemic was still a threat, Jansson would not permit a doctor to come and heal them. Fearing cholera, Root, his wife, and child escaped and fled to a nearby city. Unfortunately, Jansson's followers brought them back since Root agreed that Lotta would always remain living in the colony. John tried running again and made it as far as Chicago, but was brought back once again. Finally, Root knew his only recourse was to take Jansson to court. However, the trial never reached a conclusion because Root shot Jansson on May 13, 1850, at the courtroom in Cambridge, Illinois sending Root to jail and ending Jansson's reformation.

After Jansson's death, the colony continued producing brooms, linens, wagons, carriages, and bricks. However, in 1857, the colony went bankrupt, forcing the families to move. Unfortunately, in 1861 the Bishop Hill colony dissolved.

Even though the colony no longer existed, letters were still sent back to Sweden to convince the Swedes of the "bountiful country" they had found. More than 122,000 Swedish immigrants came to America during the next decade. Although many just passed through, others settled throughout the Bishop Hill area.

Jansson did help establish a gateway for future Swedish immigrants, though the only marks left of Eric Jansson's dreams are monuments and museums. A monument in Bishop Hill park reads, "Dedicated to the memory of the Hardy Pioneers, who, in Order to Secure Religious Liberty, left Sweden, Their Native Land with all the Endearments of Home and Kindred, and Founded Bishop Hill Colony on the Uninhabited Prairies of Illinois." These words tell the story that inspired thousands of Swedish immigrants to seek a better life in America.

If you visit Bishop Hill, you will find a town that is on the national and state historical registers. With 856 households, Bishop Hill has become an attraction for many. [From "Bishop Hill." *Illinois.Com*. 2007. Museums.

<<http://www.illinois.com/details/museums.php?id=410>> (Sept. 27, 2007); Wini Caudell, "History of Bishop Hill." *Illinois Ancestors*. 1908.

<<http://www.illinoisancestors.org/swedes/bishophillhistory.htm>> (Sept. 17, 2007); Lowell A. Dearing, "Bishop Hill Colony," *Outdoor Illinois* July 1965; Paul Elmen, *Wheat Flour Messiah*; John E. Hallwas, *Western Illinois Heritage*; Percie V. Hillbrand, *The Swedes in America*; David G. Lowell, "A Prairie Dream Decaptured." *American Heritage Magazine* Oct. 1969.

<http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1969/6/1969_6_14.shtml> (Sept. 17, 2007); and Mark Wyman, "Door Way to Illinois," *Bishop Hill*. Northern Illinois University. <<http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/1999/ih629902.html>> (Sept. 17, 2007).]